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Fee, Elizabeth M.

Feeding New York's
school children

[St. Louis, Mo.]

[1916]

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Feeding New York's School Children

BY ELIZABETH M. FEE,

Supervisor New York School Lunch Committee.

THE CHILD WHO EATS AT SCHOOL

Tony was 9 years old when one day he made the discovery that many of his classmates were getting "regular meals" in the school instead of eating sandwiches brought from home, or buying pickles, cakes, or candies from nearby pushcarts and vendors' stands. This discovery set Tony to thinking, for his own lunch which he brought with him to school usually consisted of bread and some preserved meat in the form of sliced bologna. He watched other children eating with great relish hot soup, macaroni, jam sandwiches, different kinds of puddings, sugar-coated apples, and candies. He reported his discovery to his mother, with the information which he had obtained that for two or three cents he too could have such a "regular meal." Tony now eats his noon lunch at school every day in the year that school is open. He does this both because he likes to and because he has to. Tony's home is only around the corner from the school which he attends, but that home is closed and deserted until evening, when his mother and

stands down from her work.

Some mothers have their children eat their lunches at school so as to avoid the danger of street crossings between school and home.

THE PROBLEM AND ITS SOLUTION

In forty-seven elementary public schools such children are now able to take their noonday meals at a cost of a few pennies, for which they receive wholesome, well-cooked, and well-selected food. Failing such provision, these children would be compelled to make up their meals, as some still do for whom such school service is not yet available, partly with food brought from home and partly with articles of questionable nutritive value purchased from vendors in the streets about the schools, who have no conception of sanitary requirements and expose their wares to dust and handling.

The failure to provide a nourishing noonday meal for children accounts in part for the large percentage of malnutrition cases found by the medical inspectors in the schools. During the past year 16,181 cases of malnutrition were reported in the schools of New York city. In 1909, when the system of medical inspection was newly organized, and the first general physical examination of the children in the schools was in progress, the report that 7,249 children out of 235,081 examined were found to be malnourished startled the public and caused the press to engage in a discussion of the social and economic conditions which cause so many children to suffer from poor nourishment.

As a result of this disclosure, the New York School Lunch Committee was organized under the leadership of Miss Mabel H. Kittridge, who is still active in that capacity. The work of this committee found favor with the public, and won the approval of the school authorities.

The popularity of the school lunch grew so rapidly that a large number of schools which were not so equipped requested the installation of lunch services. Eventually the committee became affiliated with the New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, *as a part of the Department of Social Welfare.* Thus greater resources and facilities came within the control of the committee and its activities were greatly increased, being at present more than six times as extensive as they were when the committee originally took up the work.

PRESENT STATUS

Last year the committee operated lunch services in 19 public schools, with an aggregate enrollment of almost 27,000 pupils. A total of 1,485,527 portions of food were sold to the children, the returns for which amounted to \$14,885.27. This sum of money repaid the cost of the food, the committee bearing a deficit for the cost of service.

The equipment of kitchens and the various accessories are provided in part by the Board of Education. The Board of Estimate and Apportionment has voted a special bond issue of \$26,000 for the equipment of school kitchens and lunch rooms. This will enable the committee to extend its service to about 60 schools.

Special types of service are operated in several schools, such as those having classes for cripples and anemic children and the school for the deaf. For the crippled children special methods are followed, having in view the children's physical needs. Milk and crackers are served to the anemic children in the morning. At the school for the deaf most of the pupils eat their lunches in school, as it is considered safer to limit their going and coming amid the street traffic, and very many come from distant parts of the city and would have to stay in school for their lunches in any event. Here full-course meals are served, with daily variations in the fare. In this school the service is self-supporting.

THE FOODS SERVED

The daily menus in the schools vary, and the children are offered a large choice of desserts, in addition to the soup and the other staples, such as sandwiches and salads. Attention is also given to the preferences of children of different nationalities. In the Italian section Italian cooks are in charge of the school kitchens, and foods familiar to this nationality are served. In the Jewish sections Jewish cooks are employed who are familiar with the dietary regulations of the orthodox law.

Some items of food are sold at 1 cent and some at 2 cents. For 3 or 4 cents a child may buy a well-balanced meal, including sweets. Some children bring their bread from home, which allows them the expenditure of an extra penny for fruit or candy. It is compulsory that the children take either soup or a cup of cocoa.

Following is a list of some of the foods purchasable at a school lunch counter:

Soups—Lima bean, pea bean, rice and tomato, barley and potato, menestra.

Sandwiches—Jam, egg, salmon.

Salads—Potato, bean, lettuce, chicory.

Desserts—Apple tapioca, rice pudding, bread pudding, brown betty, baked apples, vanilla cakes (iced), spice cakes, fruits (apples, bananas, oranges), crackers, candy, peanuts, ice cream.

Beverage—Cocoa.

PREPARATION AND SERVICE

The food is prepared in kitchens in centrally located schools, from which it is distributed each day to the schools



Fig. 1. Dishing out the portions of food. Sanitary regulations with respect to workers and surroundings are observed throughout the school lunch service.

nearby, which are grouped around the central kitchen. In each central kitchen there is a manager in charge who is responsible to the supervisor for the ordering and storing of supplies, the quantity and quality of food served, the manner of sending it to the outside schools, and the accounting.

The children desiring lunches form in line in the playground at noon. The soup kettles are conveniently placed, and the children receive a tray and spoon before the bowl of soup or cocoa is placed on the tray. The children then pass along to the penny table, on which are displayed salads, sandwiches, puddings, stewed and fresh fruit, cakes, crackers, peanuts, and candy. The "penny tables" are situated in line near the children who receive their luncheon in payment for their services. The cashier stands at the end of the line to receive the pennies and to check the food purchased by the children. The children in many schools sit down on comfortable benches at tables covered with oil cloth or damask. This practice of sitting down to a table comfortably and in order is valuable, as the school is in some cases the only place where the children ever sit down to eat. After the children finish eating, they carry their trays to a table in a remote corner, designated as a scraping table. The refuse is scraped into a pail, and the trays and dishes neatly stacked in piles ready to be washed.

EDUCATIONAL VALUE

The noon hour is socialized in every school where

lunches are served. Under the supervision of teachers who maintain order without suppressing the natural desire of the children to relax during this respite, the children at the tables are able to enjoy their meals amid pleasant chatter and freedom of action. Proper table manners are encouraged, and along therewith also the wholesome habit of self-help.

The educational value of school lunches depends entirely on the attitude of principals and teachers. Where they are interested in advancing this valuable phase of the work, it is possible to teach the children how to buy, the proper choice of food, proper chewing, and orderliness at table.

HEALTH PROTECTION

The committee has adopted various means for the prevention of disease transmission through the lunch service. The employees of the committee are required to undergo a medical examination annually, with the co-operation of the Department of Health and Department of Education. The food stuffs purchased by the committee must come up to certain standards fixed by the Bureau of Food Supply of the New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor. Members of the staff of the committee make personal inspections of the factories whose products the committee may wish to purchase before any orders are placed. In addition, the committee prefers to deal with firms whose employees are given periodic medical examinations.

Another guide which the committee follows in determining from what firms not to purchase foods are the reports of the health department of violations of sanitary regulations by manufacturers of and dealers in goods purchased by hospitals.



Fig. 2. The food is prepared in central kitchen schools, each serving a group of four or five schools.

REACHING INTO THE HOME

It frequently happens that the meagerness of a child's meals and his physical appearance, indicating insufficient nourishment, will attract the attention of a teacher or a

lunch employee in the school, with the result that an inquiry will be made at the child's home.

During the winter of 1914 I had occasion to visit perhaps sixty homes in the lower East Side in the heart of the congested Italian district. The reason for my visit was an unusual one: while supervising the work in one of the central kitchens I observed a small anemic lad who on several days took up the same position outside the door of the lunch room and watched the workers with hungry eyes.



Fig. 3. The pupils of the school for the deaf have made the lunch service entirely self-sustaining.

Fig. 4. He needs all the good food he can get, but his three cents will not buy it outside of school.



Fig. 5. Good food, plenty of time in which to eat it, lots of good cheer to go with it—A daily enjoyment for thousands of children served by the School Lunch Committee.

When I finally approached the boy he appeared so straightforward and anxious to help that I asked the principal of the school if the child might help in the lunch service. The children working with him told me afterward that the new helper didn't eat anything but soup. I thought probably he had been brought up on soup and didn't care for the other foods. About two weeks later the captain of the lunch team came to me with the story that the boy had

brought a small pail to school and had put his soup in it and gone home. The following day I questioned the boy, who said his mother was sick and his brothers and sisters hungry, so he took his allotted portion of soup and bread home to share with them.

I followed up the case by visiting the home, and found an invalid mother, a brother and sister, twins, and a smaller boy. The mother had been injured in a factory fire and rendered a chronic invalid, and the father (the couple had never been married) had long since deserted the family. Through a neighborhood organization, efforts were made to provide for the proper care of the mother, and three of the children continued at school. Funds were provided for the children's lunch in school each day. In several weeks our little fellow had developed into a different sort of boy—bright, clean, and healthy looking—and the other children had also begun to show good results from proper food. The mother, who had been a despondent, complaining sort of woman, became with medical treatment and good food a happy, smiling, patient invalid.

In many families the mothers are working either in factories or doing piece work at home, and consequently have no time to spare in preparation of lunches. If the children had not the advantage of a hot, nourishing luncheon in school, they would have to go through the entire day on merely a cup of coffee with dry bread, or several dill pickles.

The work of the School Lunch Committee is not in the nature of charity relief. The aim is to provide nourishing food to the children of the poor as well as those in comfortable circumstances at cost. Nevertheless, the lunch service has afforded opportunity to reach into the homes of indigent families who were not recipients of charity and yet deserved such assistance as it was possible to secure for them.

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